



Best of both worlds

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Prospective university graduates torn between going abroad and staying home for their master's degree have another option: enrolling in a foreign university based in the mainland.

One such university - Duke Kunshan University - in Kunshan, Jiangsu province, is a joint venture between Duke University in Durham, North Carolina and Wuhan University.

DKU will open its doors next fall, and to begin with, it will offer master's degrees in medical physics, global health and management studies.

At undergraduate level, no formal degrees are being offered. But the Semester Abroad program allows students from any American or Chinese university to spend a semester studying or researching subjects ranging from the humanities and natural sciences to Chinese language studies.

Pedagogical experience in the Semester Abroad program will be used to develop teaching and assessment methods that cater to both American and Chinese students.

This will lay the foundation for DKU's liberal arts curriculum to be launched in five years' time, said Laurie Patton, dean of arts and science at Duke University, who heads a committee in charge of developing that curriculum.

"How can we create a curriculum where we engage with both populations?" Patton said.

That conversation across cultures is part of the learning. It should not just happen in an episodic way but rather in a very vibrant way as part of a broader curriculum, Patton added.

She acknowledges the tension between the mastery of a field, a traditional strength of Chinese education, and American-style liberal arts. "Mastery is about developing excellence in a specialized subject whereas the liberal arts integrate diverse disciplines in the humanities and social sciences."

Patton added: "We are in an age of fusion education, which is the best of both. The key is to make that tension creative rather than destructive."

One example of fusion education that is already taking place at Duke - a private university with about 13,000 undergraduate and graduate students - is the Bass Connections program, where hundreds of students have formed 36 interdisciplinary research groups led by 50 faculty members. Each team member uses knowledge from their respective major to work together on a social problem in education, energy, global health, neurology or information technology.

For example, a student team may develop educational materials on energy to be used by the United Nations in a post-conflict country.

Fusion education is also evident in the flipped classroom, where students self-learn material through online textbooks and lectures at home. Class time is used for applying that knowledge through solving problems, practicing critical thinking skills central to the liberal arts.

Initial experiments showed that a chemistry class with more than 100 students is better at using new information for problem-solving compared with another chemistry class of the same size taught through traditional lectures.

This classroom model is now used in some chemistry, biology, public policy, Jewish studies and history classes, from small seminars of under 50 students to larger classes of more than 200. A third method of practicing fusion education is to make education itself the object of critical thinking.

"Provide opportunities for reflection on educational practice," Patton said. "Often, students don't take time to ask: 'Am I being educated in the way that I want to be?' Am I being driven not only by the credentials, but also by a question of deeper purpose? What is that deeper purpose?"

She once asked her class to think of one question that they believe will motivate them for the rest of their life. By reflecting on the way they are educated, students broaden their thinking and are able to voice ideas for improved pedagogical methods at the same time.

Another common topic of inquiry in the liberal arts is the work of governments. But the mainland, DKU's host, is not known for allowing free and public criticism of the government.

In a Bloomberg article in November 2011, Duke University president Richard Brodhead was quoted as saying: "We know China does not observe the same norms of First Amendment rights that we're used to in the [United States].

"If you want to engage in China, you have to acknowledge that fact."

Patton remains optimistic that there is room to maneuver. "I don't know for sure. It's an empirical question. I can say that we expect and have been assured [that we can have] a vibrant conversation about all the difficult issues," she said.